Military Order

of the

Loyal Legion of the United States

Commandery of the State of Massachusetts

IN MEMORIAM

Companion

James Russell Lowell

James Russell Lowell

Elected April 9, 1890. 3d Class. Insignia 7963.

A gentleman who, in civil life, during the Rebellion was specially distinguished for conspicuous and consistent loyalty. His wise and patriotic words guided the public mind to lofty principle, as the heroic deeds of others of his name and lineage aided on the battlefield in saving the nation.

MILITARY ORDER OF THE LOYAL LEGION OF THE UNITED STATES.

HEADQUARTERS, COMMANDERY OF THE STATE OF MASSACHUSETTS.

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AT A STATED MEETING OF THIS COMMANDERY, HELD FEBRUARY 3, 1892, THE FOLLOWING TRIBUTE TO THE MEMORY OF COMPANION

James Russell Lowell

WAS READ BY COMPANION COLONEL THOMAS WENTWORTH HIGGINSON, AND WAS ADOPTED BY A UNANIMOUS VOTE.

COMPANIONS:

The death of James Russell Lowell takes from us a man rich beyond all other Americans in poetic impulses, in width of training, in varied experience, and in readiness of wit; sometimes entangled and hampered by his own wealth; unequal in expression, yet rising on the highest occasions to the highest art; blossoming early, yet maturing late; with a certain indolence of temperament, yet accomplishing all the results of strenuous labor; not always judicial in criticism, especially in early years, yet steadily expanding and deepening; retaining in age the hopes and sympathies of his youth; and dying, with singular good fortune, just after he had gathered into final shape the literary harvest of his life.

All this was Lowell, and all these aspects of his life have been well delineated. The only aspect, perhaps, which has not as yet been sufficiently analyzed has been his relation to the great Civil War, and to the events which led up to it. It is this part of his life which I have selected for a brief memorial here. Nowhere could it be more appropriate, since he was rendered one of us, not merely in sympathy but technically, through this very aspect of his career, having been elected on April 9, 1890, a third-class Companion of this Order, and as his surviving compeer, Mr. Whittier, was elected, on the principle of Æsop's trumpeter, who was put to death by the enemy on the ground that one such trumpeter was equivalent to a great many soldiers. Were it possible to reverse our hereditary principle, he might well have been elected on another ground, as the uncle of those three heroic youths who deprived us by their very heroism of the privilege of claiming them as companions of our Order. There is no more charming personal revelation in Lowell's writings than where he calls up the memories of those lost nephews, in describing, at the beginning of the essay, "On a Certain Condescension in Foreigners," his walk from Elmwood to Harvard square about 1870:

"The war was ended. I might walk townward without that aching dread of bulletins that had darkened the July sunshine and twice made the scarlet leaves of October seem stained with blood. I remember with a pang, half-proud, half-painful, how, so many years ago, I had walked over the same path and felt round my finger the soft pressure of a little hand that was one day to harden with faithful grip of sabre. On how many paths, leading to how many homes where proud memory does all she can to fill up the fireside gaps with shining shapes, must not men be walking in just such pensive moods as I? Ah, young heroes, safe in immortal youth as those of Homer, you at least carried your ideal hence untarnished! It is locked for you beyond moth or rust in the treasure chamber of death."

Lowell's early conversion into a reformer has never been fully delineated, and there could be no more appropriate place in which to consider it than this.

He was, as he says in his address on Democracy, hy education and temperament a Conservative; in his Class Poem of 1838 we find him taking the conventional view of the Abolitionists as a race of pestilent agitators, excepting only the Rev. Dr. Channing, who up to that time had rather held aloof from all such organizations. A few years later we find him wholly identified with them, one of their official representatives and their poet laureate; and this not merely with the less ohnoxious "Liberty Party," with which Whittier was connected, and who always supported the United States Constitution, but with the Garrisonian Disunionists themselves. In the classification of that time, he was a far more radical abolitionist than Whittier ever was. For ten years, from 1847 to 1856, his name appeared in the annual report of the Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society as either a counsellor or a vice-president. The explanation is a very simple one; he had in the meantime wooed and married, with a love which they themselves compared to that of Dante and Beatrice, only that it was more reciprocal, a woman of uncommon gifts and attractions, and what was more essential, a lineal descendant of Anne Hutchinson, the Puritan reformer.

When we consider that Anne Hutchinson in 1636 swept away by her magic influence such men as Vane, Cotton, Wheelwright and all but five members of the Boston Church; that she influenced, according to Bancroft, the distribution of town lots, the assessment of rates, the respect paid to magistrates and the prosecution of the Pequot War; so that nothing was left for the dissatisfied party except to banish her from the colony; it is not perhaps strange that her fairer and lovelier descendant, Maria White, should have achieved a more remarkahle event than these by making a Garrisonian Abolitionist out of her lover.

As a result, one may well read in the last Contributors' Club of the Atlantic Monthly the charming picture of the newly married pair as they appeared ahout 1844, when Lowell was 25, and his father said of him, in alluding to his preferring to walk up and down the piazza during family prayers, "James is not serious, as yet, but he has a good heart and is a foe to every mortal wrong."

At any rate Lowell approached the war not merely as a foe to every mortal wrong, but as one who had been a Garrisonian, and therefore a disunionist. This may not have entered logically into his mind as a conclusion, but it had long been there as a sentiment, a part of the atmosphere. He has put it distinctly on record in the very first poem of the first series of the Biglow Papers where he makes his Hosea say in conclusion:

"Ef I'd my way I hed ruther
We should go to work and part, —
They take one way, we take t'other, —
Guess it wouldn't break my heart;
Man hed ough' to put asunder
Them that God has noways jined;
An' I shouldn't gretly wonder
Ef there's thousands o' my mind."

It is Hosea, throughout these poems, who represents Lowell himself. It will be remembered that Parson Wilbur elsewhere describes Hosea as being somewhat infected with the peculiar notions of a print called the Liberator, "whose heresies" (he adds) "I take every proper opportunity of combating, and of which, thank God, I have never read a single line." We cannot understand that period without also bearing in mind that many persons outside of the Garrisonians were struggling, amid the seeming triumphs of slavery, with such thoughts as this. When we remember that a man so observant of public sentiment as General Banks went so far as to say that people were thinking whether it might be needful in a certain contingency to let the Union slide, it was easy for the more impetuous to consider whether the time had not come to let the contingency slide; and Lowell was undoubtedly in this attitude.

But Maria Lowell died in 1853; and it seemed to all of us at that time that her death made a temporary reaction in Lowell's life; it made him a recluse, seemed to separate him from his previons associates and from all that was too vividly associated with her. For a few years he allowed his name to remain on the list of vice-presidents of the Anti-Slavery Society, but that was all. During all the long period of the fugitive slave cases, the Kansas troubles and the John Brown excitement, I can remember nothing that seemed to identify him at all with the party of agitation, except that once, on meeting him while I was under indictment for participation in the Anthony Burns riot in 1854, he put his hand on my head and said rather approvingly, "This is a traitor's head." But perhaps he only did it on the general principle announced by Scott in "Rob Roy" that treason has been in all ages accounted the crime of a gentleman.

The war may then be said to have come to him at last as to one with a habit of mind formed under the Garrisonian influence, which did not make him so much shrink from disunion *per se* as hope for the abolition of slavery through the attempt at disunion. With this tradition in his mind he may have hailed the war with a certain sense of relief. For the abolitionists themselves, it must be remembered, had always held more or less firmly to the belief that slavery was what physicians call a self-limited disease; and the Rev. Orange Scott had predicted in 1836 that within twenty-five years every slave in America would "be as free as Colonel Benton"—a remarkable prophecy which hit within two years of the actual proclamation of liberty.

General J. D. Cox tells us that when the Ohio Senate was in session on April 12, 1861, a senator came hurriedly in and said, "Mr. President, the telegraph announces that the secessionists are bombarding Fort Sumter," upon which there was an instant of hush, broken by the voice of a woman in the gallery who exclaimed fervently, "Glory to God." The woman was Abby Kelley Foster of Worcester, Massachusetts, one of the most gifted of the early anti-slavery apostles, and one of the women to whom Lowell paid the highest tribute. It was not possible but that some such feeling—the instinctive belief that the Lord was now visibly stretching out his hand to make Israel free—

should mingle in the heart of every trained abolitionist with the dread and abhorrence of civil war. It was so, unquestionably, with Lowell.

Accordingly, during the months when the war cloud was bursting, Lowell wrote some papers in the Atlantic Monthly which went far beyond current opinion; and were so strong and scorching that no utterance of that time, except perhaps some of Motley's letters, now seems so filled with steel and iron. "The Election in November." "The Question of the Hour." "E Pluribus Unum," and above all "The Pickens and Stealin's Rebellion." This last (Atlantic Monthly, VII., 757), bearing a title that was effective at the time, but now seems trivial, would be perhaps the best document to put into the hands of those younger Southerners who find it hard, as one of them wrote the other day in the Nation, to get at the real state of mind of liberty-loving Northern men at that period. It took additional force from appearing in a nnmber of the magazine expressly prepared for free distribntion among our troops round Washington, and issued by a special snbscription to which Lowell gave fifty dollars.

He opens the article by saying, "Had any one ventured to prophesy on the fourth of March, that the immediate prospect of civil war would be hailed by the people of the free states with a unanimous shout of enthusiasm he wonld have been thought a madman. Yet the prophesy would have been verified." Then he goes on to lavish his wit and his vast memory on salient illustrations and telling points. To whom but Lowell would it have occurred to write, by way of illustration, "Lord de Roos, long suspected of cheating at cards, would never have been convicted but for the resolution of an adversary, who, pinning his hand to the table with a fork, said to him blandly, 'My Lord, if the ace of spades is not under your Lordship's hand, why then I beg your pardon.' It seems to us that a timely treatment of Governor Letcher in the same energetic way would have saved the disasters of Harper's Ferry and Norfolk," And he says at last, writing of a time when Mr. Seward was still trying to convince the world and himself that the war was to have no bearing whatever on slavery, "We cannot think that the war we are entering on can end without some radical change in the system of African Slavery. . . . The fiery tongues of the batteries in Charleston harbor accomplished in one day a conversion which the constancy of Garrison and the eloquence of Phillips had failed to bring about in thirty years."

Such words were half battles; and followed as they were by that powerful poem, "The Washers of the Shroud," (Atlantic Monthly, VIII., 641) they brought him to the mood of the second series of the Biglow Papers, in which there is no trace of disunion, but the full recognition of that ground swell of national emotion felt alike by Conservative and Disunionist, in the Northern states. Lowell once told me that he had tried, earlier, to renew the series but had not quite reached the mood for it; and he once told Mr. Sanborn that he had thought of sending his Hosea to Kansas. The first of the new Biglow Papers appeared in the Atlantic Monthly (IX., 126), and in one of the last he gives us once more the key to his heart in the words he attributes to his hero:

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Why, hain't I held 'em on my knee?
Didn't I love to see 'em growin',
Three likely lads ez wal could be,
Hahnsome an' brave an' not tu knowin'?
I set 'an look into the blaze
Whose natur, jes' like theirn, keeps climbin',
Ez long'z it lives, in shinin' ways,
An' half despise myself for rhymin'.

He half despised himself for rhyming. But those of us who recall the Harvard Memorial Service, at which the Commemoration Ode was read, will recall how it made everything else that was said on that day, except the prayer of Phillips Brooks, seem trivial and easily forgotten, and how it made us feel for the moment that, in the words of Lowell's early favorite, Keats, "fine writing is, next to fine doing, the top thing in the universe." And to all the qualities which I began by attributing to Lowell may be added this, that he made the high-water mark of his poetic achievement coincide with the high-water mark of the history of our nation.

PUBLISHED BY VOTE OF THE COMMANDERY,—

BREVET BRIGADIER GENERAL JOHN L. OTIS,
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